WHY NOT?

Kulapat Yantrasast may have gotten his start as Tadao Ando's translator, but it's his own architectural language that has the art world lining up for his open, sensuous spaces.

BY TED LOOS PORTRAIT BY JEREMY BITTERMANN

PHOTO BY JEREMY BITTERMANN

"One way I think about architecture is: if that building were a person, would I go talk to him at a party?"

—Kulapat Yantrasast

Not everyone has yet heard of Kulapat Yantrasast, the Bangkok-born architect, 46, who founded the design firm wHY a decade ago… but they will soon. Seemingly all of a sudden, his work is penetrating the culture at large.

In his adopted hometown of Los Angeles (where he built himself a strikingly open, surprisingly sensuous concrete home in Venice Beach), Yantrasast and his team are in the throes of designing the Maurice and Paul Marciano Art Foundation, a boldface project from the Guess Jeans founders that will be housed in an old Masonic temple. He's also designed major art galleries in town, such as the David Kordansky Gallery and the Perry Rubenstein Gallery, as well as the humble Art Bridge over the Los Angeles River made from recycled trash, of all things.

Yantrasast's work can be sampled on the East Coast, too. He designed the cafe and retail spaces of the newly opened Clark Center building at the Clark Art Institute in the Berkshires, a project by his mentor, Tadao Ando, and he delicately conceived galleries for the new Harvard Art Museum (by Renzo Piano), which debuts this fall.

Sitting in the small SoHo loft the firm uses as a New York outpost, Yantrasast is chatty, friendly and funny—it turns out that being serious about architecture doesn't mean you have to be a bore (part of his firm is devoted to creating cutting-edge furniture and unclassifiable art objects). He has a remarkable number of metaphors to talk about the practice of architecture. You can hear and see the creative wheels spinning.

"One way I think about architecture is: if that building were a person, would I go talk to him at a party?" he says. "Sometimes a building is like a person who came to the party in an outfit that says, 'look at me!'"

"Quiet" is a word Yantrasast keeps coming back to for his work, though he's not opposed to creating a dramatic form now and again. "I like to do that sometimes," he says. "But I tend to balance it more with a long-term look at what that architecture needs to serve." Perhaps that approach is the reason that he has been commissioned to do so much museum work at a young age—including the type of master-planning consultation he is doing for the Worcester Art Museum. Usually architects wait decades to get those projects.

Yantrasast's fans include mega-dealer and former museum director, Jeffrey Deitch, a longtime friend who has recommended him for several residential projects. "I was always impressed that he has this combination of architectural brilliance and a deep understanding of the role of architecture can play in supporting art," says Deitch. "There are so many brilliant architects who aren't comfortable unless

The David Kordansky Gallery reopens in its new digs with Rashid Johnson's "Islands."

This fall will see the debut of the galleries reconceived by Yantrasast at the Renzo Piano-designed Harvard Art Museum.

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they are outshining the art."

Yantrasast's first freestanding museum—the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan—may be the single project that helped him get to his current level of status. Built in 2007, it was the first museum ever to be awarded the LEED Gold certification for environmental status. Intended as a "front porch" for the city, the building has a massive concrete overhang in front that's supported by three concrete slabs. In some hands, that could form a cold embrace, but Yantrasast rendered it warmly, having learned how to use high-quality concrete from his mentor, Ando. Ample but well-controlled natural sunshine floods the space, particularly in the beloved "lantern galleries" on the third floor, which is topped by a huge light well.

That helped lead to one of his biggest projects, a $55 million addition to the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, the oldest and biggest art museum in the state. Two buildings are forthcoming from wHY to combine with the stately, formidable original structure; the first is a shimmering glass box that signals openness and a friendly attitude.

"They loved our thoughts about 'acupuncture architecture,'" says Yantrasast, who coined this witty concept (another metaphor) and loves the comparison to Eastern medicine. "To clear the energy, you have to add some spaces around it—but the adding alone is not going to solve it. It's about the flow and the energy moving around."

His Asian roots have informed but never dominated his work. After college in Bangkok, Yantrasast attended the University of Tokyo for a master's and Ph.D. before going to work for Ando, who is based in Osaka; a six-month gig turned into seven years of traveling and being a vital team member on projects like The Clark. Though clearly an influence, Ando's work is more "controlling" in the Japanese style, says Yantrasast, while his own has a larger "sense of openness," which is more inspired by traditional Thai architecture.

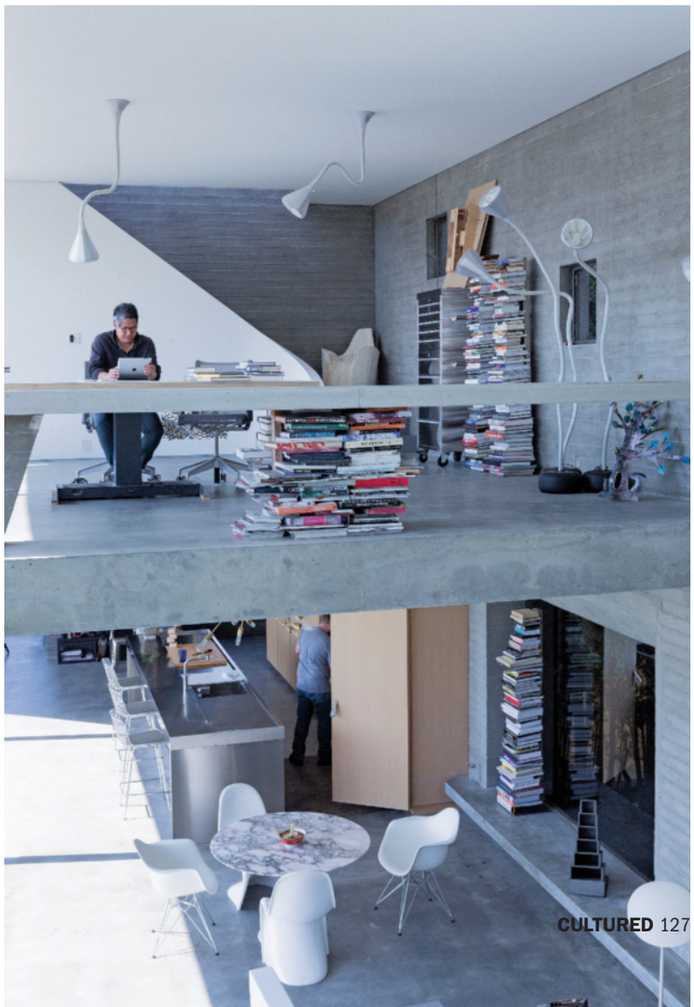
The new Pomona College Studio Art Hall, which is making huge strides in green design, epitomizes this approach. "The faculty really challenged us to create a space that is indoor-outdoor and doesn't use much electricity," Yantrasast says. "So, maximizing the natural light and the ventilation, we formed this art village around a courtyard." The peaked roof form takes its cues from the mountains in the distance.

The way Yantrasast worked with the Pomona staff is also a testament to his core belief in another metaphor: that architecture's role in society is most similar not to art, but to fine food and dining—both are functional art forms that bring people together by their very nature.

"Look at how fast-food culture has changed in 20 years," says Yantrasast, who doesn't cook but loves to entertain in the house he built for himself. "People are now so informed and clear about what they are eating. I would love architecture to get to that place—where people don't go for the stereotype, they want complexity and to know the philosophy behind it… where the chef comes from, what he's thinking."

Whatever Yantrasast cooks up next, people will be lining up to sample it.

PHOTOS, BY IWAN BAAN (VENICE); HOLLYWOOD HILLS HOUSE RENDERING COURTESY WHY



Clockwise from top: A rendering of a house in the Hollywood Hills; the architect at work in his home; Yantrasast's concrete residence in Venice Beach, California.

Heart of Glass

Thirteen years in the making, architect **Frank Gehry** ushers in a new enlightenment in Paris with the Fondation Louis Vuitton.

BY TED LOOS PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD EBERLE

The new Frank Gehry-designed Fondation Louis Vuitton opens in October in Paris' Jardin d'Acclimatation.

"In the French system, you do a sketch and you stick to it… But that's not how I work. I evolve over time."

—Frank Gehry

Remember the "Bilbao Effect"? That was the term coined to describe the civic transformation that occurred in the formerly depressed Spanish city of Bilbao when the Guggenheim Museum commissioned architect Frank Gehry to design a dazzling, titanium-covered branch there. The museum, which opened in 1997, is the project that cemented Gehry as the world's most famous architect.

Paris, of course, doesn't need the Bilbao Effect. It has reigned as a seat of culture for hundreds of years and has numerous pristine examples of great architectural style. And yet, Gehry has done it again with his dramatic new 9,000-square-foot building for the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the nonprofit museum arm of French magnate Bernard Arnault's fashion and luxury empire, Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton.

It's the jolt of energy the City of Light didn't know it needed.

Opening at the end of October in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, the children's park at the northern end of the Bois de Boulogne, the Fondation Louis Vuitton is a striking and symphonic assemblage of the sail shapes for which Gehry is known, but this time, in shimmering glass. The sails are all canted to one side, as if a stiff wind has blown through the famous former hunting grounds, one of Paris' beloved green spaces, and tried to knock them over.

The building—probably this year's most talked about architectural feat—will hold the foundation's permanent art collection as well as a host of temporary exhibitions. The Fondation Louis Vuitton was established in 2006 but hasn't had a permanent home until now, though it has vigorously been supporting the arts all over the world, as with its sponsorship of Museum of Modern Art shows of Richard Serra, among others.

"I lived in Paris for a year in the 1960s and I spent a lot of time in the Bois de Boulogne," says Gehry, recounting a lesser-known chapter of his life well before he became a Pritzker Prize winner. Turns out, he's also a fan of Marcel Proust's epic novel "Remembrance of Things Past,"—who knew? "The Jardin d'Acclimatation has a big history, and probably Proust played there," he says. "I got a little weepy about it as we went through this project."

That sentimental note reflects one of the strengths running through all of Gehry's work. For all of the technical brilliance, it produces an emotional effect. "When you are in front of it, you are overwhelmed by the sensitivity," says Jean-Paul Claverie, who serves as Arnault's top cultural advisor and was instrumental in bringing the Fondation Louis Vuitton to life. "It brings you up. You forget the technology that went into it. Only the top artists are able to do that."

The space where the new Fondation Louis Vuitton stands was a derelict former bowling alley, which was torn down. But site restrictions meant that Gehry only had the original building's two-story height to work with. He couldn't rely on towering verticality to make an impact, so he thought about the building in two parts.

"On the sides, the sails hang off the building to give a sense of movement, like a boat," says Gehry, who identifies himself as an avid sailor. "We call the solid white part inside 'the iceberg.'" That interior portion, made of layers of specially developed concrete, holds 11 galleries for art—though the architect says he's also "fascinated" with the space between the sails (which the French call *barrière*s).

"I'd like to see art in there," he says of the space that could become a cutting-edge sculpture park. "I've talked to Richard Prince and Jeff Koons and they are willing to play in that space." Although Gehry is not charged with any real programming duties, the idea of him leveraging his connections with two top artists is a demonstration of his level of dedication to the museum—and his endless creativity.

Like many huge projects, the Fondation Louis Vuitton took years to get off the ground—13, to be exact. The courtship between the dapper, somewhat severe and thoroughly French Arnault and Los Angeles-based Gehry—creator of messy-looking sketches that turn into rule-breaking buildings—had its odd-couple moments.

"We did some sketches and models, and he picked one of five," recalls Gehry. "But the French system is Beaux Arts: You do a sketch and you stick to it. That's how Bernard was trained. But that's not how I work… I evolve over time."

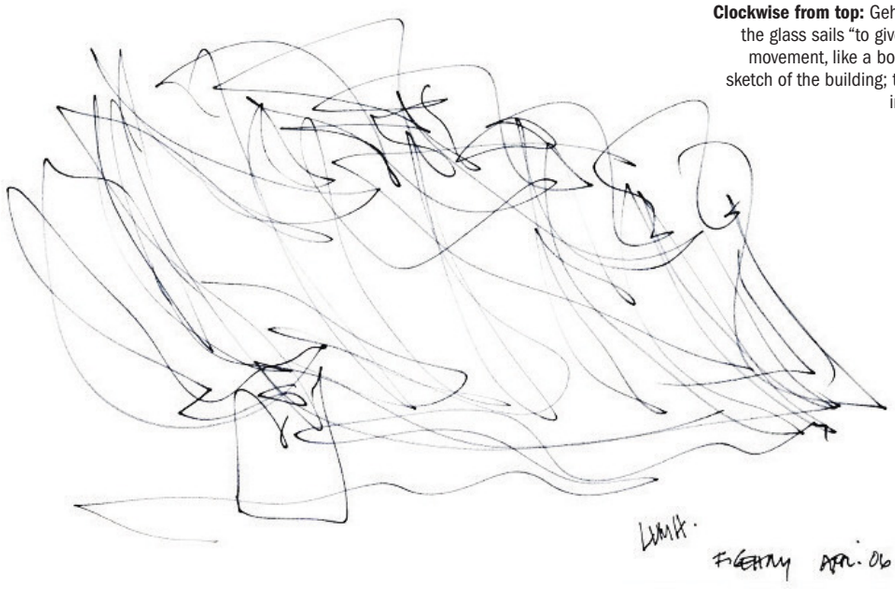
Needless to say, they worked it out and arrived at a happy ending, with only a few elements scrapped from the original discussions. "He would tell me when he didn't like something," says Gehry. "He was clear in what he wanted and respectful of what I brought to the table. He never pushed me into a compromising position." He adds, "I get a lot of energy from clients, especially when they are clear about their goals and we know where we both draw the line."

The intellectual common ground where the two men met was technology. "One of Frank's earliest plans we would not have been able to construct with the available technology," says Claverie. So they came up with new means. "For two years, Monsieur Arnault had a team of 200 engineers create the technology to respect Frank's vision." The 12 glass sails were among the most complicated elements of the building, since each one is unique.

Gehry has been in the forefront of high-tech architecture for decades. "I started a company a long time ago called Gehry Technology," he says. "We work with the French airplane manufacturer Dassault. We took their software for airplanes and modified it for our purposes. It allows you to show the builder how to build it perfectly; usually with 2-D drawings you run into trouble with a pipe hitting a beam somewhere."

It becomes clear that Gehry is really talking about how he has perfected the dissemination of information, rather than structural engineering itself. Again, he upends our expectations of what a "starchitect" is, and what one can do. "It's an enlightenment," he says of the software, and it's a good bet he intends an echo of the Enlightenment of the 18th century, when humanism and science met to transform man's vision of the world.

They know a little something about the Enlightenment in France, and Gehry's Fondation Louis Vuitton is poised to fit right in.



Clockwise from top: Gehry designed the glass sails "to give a sense of movement, like a boat;" an early sketch of the building; the architect in his studio.